

REPORT TO: COMMUNITIES AND HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

DATE: 8th JUNE

**REPORT OF: CABINET MEMBER FOR SUSTAINABLE STOCKPORT AND
CABINET MEMBER FOR INCLUSIVE NEIGHBOURHOODS**

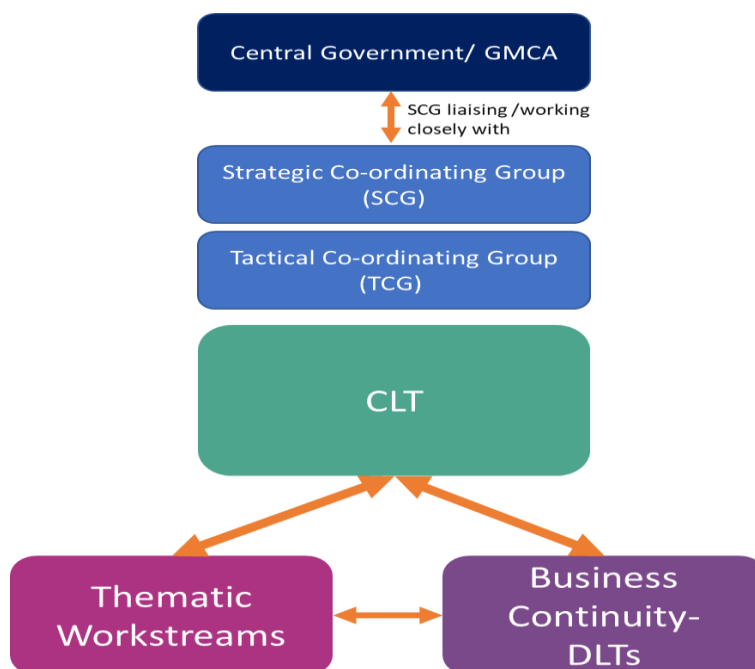
REPORT TITLE: RESPONDING TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The spread of Covid-19, declared a global public health emergency, has created unprecedented circumstances within which the Council, working with our communities and partners, have had to respond.
- 1.2 Whilst an understandably difficult period for many living and working within Stockport, we have also witnessed an incredible and inspiring outpouring of neighbourliness and community spirit.
- 1.3 This report provides an overview of the Council's response to date, building on regular updates received directly by members and including detail relating to the remit of this committee, and a view of how this response will be developing over the coming weeks and months.

2.0 Responding to Covid-19: Council approach

- 2.1 The Council has established a robust and responsive governance to facilitate cross partnership and organisational response. This has included close working with Government and Greater Manchester:



Responded to Government guidance and advice

2.2 The Council's responses have been very much guided by advice and guidance provided by Central Government and the Corporate Leadership Team have reviewed guidance and announcements daily throughout this period. The specific relevant published guidance in terms of the remit of this Committee has included:

- Coronavirus Act 2020
- Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020
- 02/04/20 Information Sharing
- 07/04/20 Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) Survey
- 07/04/20 (Updated 28/04/20) Advice to Local Authorities on Prioritising Waste Collection
- 11/04/20 Support for Domestic Abuse Victims
- 17/04/20 Support for Waste Services
- 27/04/20 Guidance for Social Landlords on Essential Moves
- 18/04/20 (Updated 23/04/20) Parks and Public Spaces
- 02/05/20 Funding for Charities to Support Most Vulnerable
- 05/05/20 Household Waste and Recycling Centres Non-Statutory Guidance
- 13/05/20 Guidance on Safer Public Spaces
- 13/05/20 Guidance on Green Spaces
- 13/05/20 Guidance for Public on Phased Return of Outdoor Sport and Recreation
- 13/05/20 Guidance for Providers of Outdoor Facilities on the Phased Return of Sport and Recreation
- 14/05/20 Funding for Homelessness Charities
- 18/05/20 Youth Endowment Fund

Provided robust and responsive communications

2.3 Clear and responsive communications have been fundamental throughout the Council's response. This has included:

- Boroughwide public communications, sharing public health messages, information about support and celebrating local businesses and organisations;
- Targeted communications for those who are shielding or vulnerable;
- Daily members e-brief;
- Daily all colleague e-briefings;
- Regular forums (2/3 times a week) with Partners including: Schools, Businesses, VCSE, Food Banks.

Redesigned service provision

2.4 The organisation has made several changes to provision in response to Covid-19.

This has included changing the way some services are delivered, and in some instances, temporarily suspending some services. This has included:

- Closure of public-facing buildings (e.g. libraries, registrars);
- Virtual formal meetings;
- Face-to-face assessments and reviews moved to video/ teleconferencing;
- Temporary suspension of services, schemes and projects (e.g. registrations of births and marriages, Apprenticeships, Bed Every Night Project);
- Early years, schools and post-16 setting closures;
- Reduction in waste collection, suspension of park maintenance services, closure of public outdoor sport facilities.

Introduced new service provision

2.5 Alongside service changes a series of new services have also been introduced.

This has included:

- Stockport Economic Resilience Forum, including: Stockport Jobs Match service, SK Business Recovery website, New Business Grant scheme and daily update newsletter with advice and information about Covid-19 and responses to support businesses
- Stockport Support Hub, including: Covid-19 helpline; new services for food, shopping, medicines, driving support, PPE distribution, social contact;
- Door step / phone check-ins with those adults and children in receipt of care / additional support (e.g. EHCs, over 70s with assisted bin collection) and those on national shielded list;
- New pathways and revised services via MASSH including: new emotional wellbeing hub which includes daily triage and allocation of appropriate support for children and young people; revised early support offer with daily triage;
- Hardship Grant to supplement Council Tax Support (unallocated funds will be used for additional discretionary payments for Council Tax Support, Housing Benefit and support funds);
- New hotel and temporary provision to accommodate rough sleepers;
- Coordination of childcare for vulnerable children and children of key workers.

3.0 Responding to Covid-19: Thematic approach

3.1 The key programmes of work in the Covid-19 response have been:

- Humanitarian Aid
- Voluntary and Community Response
- Food
- Workforce
- Mortality Management
- Finance
- Out of Hospital Support – Adults and Disability and PPE
- Contact Testing and Tracing
- Children and Education
- Economic Resilience

A summary of scrutiny responsibilities for the Council's Covid-19 response can be found in Appendix.1.

3.2 An overview of the activity, progress and impact to date in relation to the programmes and services relevant to this Committee is set out below.

Workstream	Voluntary and Community Response
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This workstream was established to support the VCSE as it responded to challenges of Covid-19. It has however proved crucial in coordinating a collaborative response as part of the wider Humanitarian Programme. This work falls into two strands; how the sector is supporting our communities; and how we are working to ensure a robust and sustainable third sector.

A VCSE Steering Group has been established, initially comprising 20 individuals from 15 organisations. Through the Covid-19 response period this forum has grown and now has over 60 members. The Steering Group serves as a primary route for liaison with the sector to both understand and respond to immediate needs of our communities in relation to digital inclusion; shopping and food supply; social contact; access to medications; and the immediate and longer-term financial and mental health needs.

The VCSE is supporting across the four key service offers that sit behind the Covid-19 Community Welfare Line and have collectively supported over 1,500 cases in addition to the delivery of their core services offers.

To support the sector's response, we have worked in partnership with HealthWatch Stockport to register new volunteers with over 400 volunteers newly registered with HealthWatch. 140 are able to be deployed through our online volunteer request form where agencies in need of volunteers can set out their requirements and be matched with appropriate volunteers.

At a grassroots level, we are working to support the work of 17 Covid-19 mutuals in their work within their community. Providing advice and guidance in volunteer processes and protocols, brokering resources and sharing information.

The Stockport Local fund was opened as a Community Support Fund, to provide small grants to mobilise the VCSE response and support organisations to keep Covid-19 critical services operating in the face of increased costs and reduced capacity. In all, 45 investments totally £41,890 have been made supporting food distribution and wellbeing & excluded groups, in addition to investments in our foodbanks. Going forward, a funding partnership with SHG, Sector3 and SMBC is working to maximise applications to external grant funds which are increasingly available to support the sector.

Workstream	Finance
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Financial Inclusion

Since lockdown began, a range of Council services (Housing, Revenues and Benefits, Growth, Adult Social Care and Children & Young People) have been working in partnership with the CAB, Credit Union and Food Banks to support the financial resilience of our communities. We have monitored the impact of lockdown on our communities, the changing demand on our frontline services and worked to implement immediate enhancements to our current offer.

A survey of private landlords investigated the extent to which private renters were already experiencing rent arrears and DWP data shows JSA and UC claimants increased by 3,545 in Stockport last month taking the total claimant count for the borough to 8,775.

The Emergency Food offer enacted under the Food workstream, the delayed roll out of Support Funds replacing SLAs, an enhanced loan offer through the Credit Union and the local advice and guidance offer have provided immediate support to those who need it.

Our focus going forward is on developing a strong self-service offer building on Better Off, and supported by a clear communications campaign, to support those newly experiencing a loss or reduction in income to proactively respond to their change in circumstances and reduce the risk of falling into financial crisis.

Work Area	Street Cleaning
<p>This service was reduced to a skeleton one when the initial lockdown was introduced, with just key routes and litter bin emptying being undertaken. The service has been gradually increasing during May as the lockdown eased and staffing resources increase. We are still operating a limited service as TLC do not have a full staffing resource. This may change as vulnerable shielded operatives 12-week self-isolation period is scheduled to end in June.</p>	
Work Area	Parks and Open Spaces
<p>In line with government guidance, open spaces and parks remain open to provide places for people to exercise one time a day in the fresh air. We closed play and sports areas and have put up signs in our parks reinforcing the social distancing measures that people must take when they are using our green spaces. We did stop grounds maintenance activity following the initial lockdown to provide civic leadership on social distancing. We have re-opened sports areas following the Prime Minister's recent easing announcements and have re-introduced grounds maintenance activity on a reduced basis in recent weeks. The reduction in frequency of mowing has meant that grass has grown longer and seeded, creating an increased biodiversity across the borough.</p>	
Work Area	Highways and grounds maintenance
<p>From 24th March, grounds maintenance was suspended, and only essential highway works were being carried out. We also suspended our highways capital programme. This was to provide civic leadership in terms of demonstrating social distancing and to ensure that there is the resilience in the workforce to redirect staff to those vital front-line services that could not be stopped as needed. During recent weeks, there has been a gradual reintroduction of highways work, with maintenance activity and capital schemes back on site. This is not at full capacity as our contractors, particularly TLC, are operating with reduced staffing and there remain some supply issues.</p>	
Work Area	Transport and Highways
<p>Walking and Cycling</p> <p>Officers are currently reviewing district, neighbourhood and local centres to identify pinch points where social distancing might be more challenging and potential solutions to help. Officers are also reviewing suggestions received from local groups and residents and we hope to be able to report back in the coming weeks on potential schemes.</p>	
Work Area	Waste Collection
<p>The Council and TLC have been working hard to minimise disruption to bin collections caused by to staff absence due to self-isolation. This has been a particular issue with drivers, as this is a specific role requiring significant training. Though collection of green bins was suspended briefly, during which time residents were asked to dispose of food waste in the black bins, these have now been reinstated (though fortnightly rather than every week as previously). Residents have been kept fully informed of these changes throughout, via the Council's website. It is anticipated that bulky collections and bin deliveries will be gradually reinstated over the coming weeks.</p> <p>Having been closed for a few weeks after the imposition of restrictions, two Household Waste and Recycling Centres (HWRCs) - Adswold Road and Bredbury - reopened on 2nd May. From 30th May, all HWRCs including Rose Hill HWRC will be open seven days a week from 8am to 6pm. There are however some restrictions and new measures in place to protect the health and wellbeing of residents and staff during the coronavirus pandemic. For example, in order to control the number of vehicles accessing the centres at any one time, a traffic control system will be introduced based on odd and even number plates. It will work on a four-week rota to limit the amount of traffic visiting the centres and limit the potential for staff and the public to be exposed to the virus and residents are advised to visit recycling centres only if absolutely necessary.</p>	

Construction schemes

The Council is following Government advice in relation to construction activity during the Covid-19 pandemic and as a result closed all non-essential schemes where it was not possible to work safely within the public health guidelines. This includes all Viaduct Partnership new build housing schemes.

Homelessness & Temporary Accommodation (TA)

The Council has worked with GM as part of the 'everyone in' project which has utilised five hotels to accommodate rough sleepers. There are currently eight rough sleepers accommodated in the GM hotels.

All the Council's TA accommodation has been reviewed, to prevent room sharing and to bring in measures recommended through PHE. In addition, working with Partner Registered Providers (RPs), move-on accommodation has been prioritised to create additional space – although the Government measures to prevent s21 repossession action has meant there has been a reduction in households presenting, the service has seen an increase in single former 'sofa surfers' having nowhere to stay – all of whom have been offered accommodation.

Social Housing

Stockport Homes and the Partner RPs have worked with the Council to ensure emergency repairs have been carried out and vulnerable residents have been contacted & supported through a range of measures.

Aids & Adaptations

Most works associated with the installation of aids & adaptations and emergency minor works have continued, with appropriate measures & resident consent.

Stockport Homes Pantry

Following the initial emergency food deliveries, Stockport Homes worked with the Council to expand the Pantry service to offer a full emergency delivery service (triaged through the Council's helpline) across all tenures and operated through the two larger bases at Brinnington & Bridgehall. This service, supported through additional food sourced and donated via the Council's economic development service, (including over 7,500 loaves from Allied bakery to support both the Pantry & foodbanks/mutual groups) has now been operating since the beginning of April.

Work Area	Community Safety
<p>Domestic Abuse</p> <p>After a slight initial drop in numbers of domestic abuse cases coming being referred, referral numbers have returned to more typical levels. The exception has been Operation Encompass (reporting of domestic abuse incidents through schools). Encompass referrals rose from 47 in March to 122 in April. The Positive Relationships team has also seen a 50% increase in referrals. Other domestic abuse developments have included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emergency operating guidance has been developed and shared with all front-line staff. • A tool kit for call handlers on how to do routine enquiry has been shared. • New web pages on the safeguarding partnerships sites and the Council site. • Triage arrangements for emergency accommodation. • Operation Encompass has been enhanced with advice being offered to schools. • Communications. • Posters in supermarkets and pharmacies. • New social media campaign. <p>Environmental Health</p> <p>The Environmental Health team has been working with businesses to enable social distancing to be maintained within their premises.</p> <p>Licensing</p> <p>Licensed premises are beginning to open on a takeaway basis. It is expected that easing of lockdown will see licensed premises being allowed to open for more regular business during July, subject to government assessment of the infection rate. It is anticipated that there will be an increased requirement to advise premises and to oversee arrangements in the coming weeks.</p>	

3.3 Given the pace of the Coronavirus response, a verbal update will be provided at the meeting regarding any developments following the publication of this report.

4.0 Next Steps

4.1 We are working hard with colleagues and partners both locally and across Greater Manchester to ensure that we can “build back better” and make Stockport even stronger in the future. Across Stockport people came together during the crisis and it will be important that we stay together to support recovery.

4.2 With regards to the areas within this committee’s responsibility, recovery plans will be shared with the committee as they develop. A summary of the next phase of recovery is included below for each workstream.

Workstream	Voluntary and Community Response
<p>We have begun the process of consulting the VCSE Steering Group on their priorities for a Sector Recovery Plan and scoping clear workstreams and actions.</p> <p>We have identified further investment for Sector3 to develop their capacity as an infrastructure agency to support the local VCSE and are working collaboratively to design the Sector3 offer.</p> <p>A funding partnership with SHG, Sector3 and SMBC has been established to maximise applications to external grant funds increasingly available to support the sector, and we are exploring how the volunteer offer mobilised for Covid-19 might be developed in the longer term through Sector3.</p>	

Work Area	Highways and grounds maintenance
<p>Services have been gradually reintroduced in recent weeks and members are being updated as and when their local schemes are re-commenced.</p>	

Work Area	Street Cleansing and Grounds Maintenance
<p>Services have been reintroduced although they are not operating at full capacity due to ongoing staff shortages. We will be focusing street cleansing resources in district and retail centres in coming weeks as the easing of lockdown will see more people using their local facilities. Members will also be aware that there are significant areas of local parks and grass verges that have been allowed to grow longer due to the reduced capacity, albeit the unseasonably dry weather has limited growth in recent weeks. We have continued to focus mowing regimes on sports pitches where we know that households will want to play and to avoid significant retrospective maintenance costs.</p>	

Work Area	Transport and Highways
<p>Walking and Cycling</p> <p>There will be several challenges and issues which will need to be considered before any schemes are implemented, and these will need to be reviewed on a case-by-case basis.</p> <p>The reduction in car journeys and increases in people walking and cycling creates an opportunity for society to rethink how we travel and for Stockport to make highway improvements that will improve our environment, building on the recent proposals developed for the Mayoral Challenge Fund initiative. We will be reviewing these opportunities over the coming months and reviewing our transport strategy accordingly. Officers are currently undertaking analysis of the potential trends and outcomes for transport once lockdown is released.</p> <p>In the meantime, the Council continues to work with local WalkRide groups to develop longer-term proposals for active neighbourhoods, and we are also continuing to push ahead with the development and delivery of our programme of Mayoral Challenge Funding schemes.</p>	

Work Area	Strategic Housing
<p>Construction schemes All sites are starting to reopen as soon as is safely possible, and in line with Government guidance and risk/methodology assessments.</p> <p>Homelessness & Temporary Accommodation The GM Hotels are scheduled to close at the end of June. Work is already underway with those placed into the hotels by Stockport, and officers are confident that all will be able to be accommodated within the Council's existing accommodation facilities within the borough. This work has been greatly supported by 'move on' facilitated both through additional units purchased by Stockport Homes and the assistance of the Partner RPs.</p> <p>Social Housing Stockport Homes and all Partner RPs are working to create safe working environments for both contractors and customers to allow capital works to return to site. This is including the sprinkler installation programme within the Council's tower blocks (six blocks already have sprinklers installed & commissioned).</p> <p>Aids & Adaptations Detailed risks and methodology assessments are underway to develop safe working practices to enable works to recommence. Customers are being advised on progress, and the measures to be adopted, whilst ensuring that they have an option to ask for works to be delayed.</p> <p>Stockport Homes Pantry The Pantry service is being reviewed, to allow a greater number of residents to join, and for more pantries to open to facilitate collection.</p> <p>Housing Market Initial analysis and survey work undertaken by the service with private landlords indicates a significant increase in arrears and a potential 'pent up' demand for possession action for non-payment of rent when measures are eased. Information has been provided widely to landlords on the Government's measures to prevent possession proceedings, and landlords and partner agencies have been reminded that illegal eviction is a criminal act – to date there have been no reports of attempted illegal evictions in Stockport during this crisis. Going forward, a full communications and support approach is being developed to ensure that tenants are aware of where they can seek help and support, particularly with finances and housing options.</p>	
Work Area	Waste Collection
<p>Bin collection services and arrangements at HWRCs will be kept under review and with a view to easing restrictions when it is safe and appropriate to do so. We will ensure residents are informed of any changes in advance of their introduction.</p>	

Work Area	Community Safety
<p>Domestic Abuse The next steps are to develop an exit from lockdown response. Whilst there is no evidence that there will be a big increase in referrals once lockdown is eased, it is thought prudent to prepare as though there will be.</p>	
<p>Environmental Health As lockdown is eased more businesses and shops will open. Some restrictions will still apply however, and the Council will be creating temporary alterations to shopping centres and supporting businesses to enable social distancing to be maintained.</p>	
<p>Licensing Licensed premises are beginning to open on a takeaway basis. It is expected that easing of lockdown will see licensed premises allowed to open for more regular business during July, subject to government assessment of the infection rate. It is anticipated that there will be an increased requirement to advise premises and oversee arrangements in the coming weeks.</p>	

4.3 A further update on the Council's recovery planning approach will be brought to a future scrutiny committee.

5.0 Looking ahead to recovery

5.1 As described above Council, communities and partners are currently transitioning from the immediate crisis response to a phased easing of lockdown and living with Covid-19. Given this, the Council is developing next phase plans across key strands of work identified above, alongside new areas of focus.

5.2 Whilst this has understandably been a difficult time for many of those who live or work in Stockport, as we progress and develop our recovery plans, it is more important than ever to ensure that the passion and commitment demonstrated alongside the relationships, trust and mutual respect that have been forged during this unprecedented period from across our communities, businesses, workforce and public services are nurtured.

6.0 Recommendations

6.1 As outlined in section four the Council is now moving its focus to preparing for the next phases of its response, both living with coronavirus and building back better. We are committed to doing this in collaboration with our communities, businesses, elected members, trade unions and partners through existing established forums, but also opening conversations and through testing ideas together.

6.2 The Scrutiny Committee are invited to:

- Discuss and note this report and the response to date;
- Note the commitment to return to Scrutiny with information about future phases of response.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

There are none

Anyone wishing to inspect the above background papers or requiring further information should contact Kathryn Rees on telephone number 07989208640 or alternatively email on kathryn.rees@stockport.gov.uk

Appendix.1 – Overview of response and scrutiny responsibility

Theme	Communities and Housing	Corporate Resource Management and Governance	Children and Young People	Economy and Regeneration	Adult Social Care and Health
	Mon 8 June	Tues 9 June	Weds 10 June	Thurs 11 June	Thurs 11 June
Humanitarian Aid	X	X			
Voluntary and Community Response	X				
Food		X			
Workforce		X			
Mortality Management		X			
Finance		X			
Out of Hospital Support – Adults and Disability and PPE					X
Contact Testing and Tracing					X
Children and Education			X		
Economic Resilience				X	